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ABSTRACT

The purposes of this paper are: (1) to illustrate the nature of the difficulty when disadvantaged black children are taught reading by conventional methods; (2) to show that the conflict points, specifically, the phonological conflict points, need not be a problem if they are simply disregarded; and (3) to argue that disadvantaged black children who speak nonstandard Negro dialect be taught to read their dialect first (with only grammatical changes made in reading texts to match their nonstandard grammar), and later, after they have attained some facility in standard English, they should be taught to read standard English. Some of the conflict points between nonstandard Negro dialect and standard English are identified, and how these differences conflict during the teaching of reading by conventional methods is shown. (Author/DB)

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THE INFLUENCE OF NONSTANDARD NEGRO DIALECT ON READING ACHIEVEMENT

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Many disadvantaged black children speak a variety of English that linguists have labeled nonstandard Negro dialect. This variety of English —or dialect—differs from the variety of English taught in school and included in reading texts. Specifically, nonstandard Negro dialect differs from standard English in its phonological and grammatical systems. For example, disadvantaged black children who speak nonstandard Negro dialect lack some of the phonemes in particular linguistic environments that are found in standard English, and they include phonemes not found in standard English in certain linguistic environments. Also, the grammar of nonstandard Negro dialect differs from the grammar of standard English.

The existence of nonstandard Negro dialect has been established by educators and linguists. There is no doubt that this dialect exists . . . that there is a variety of English which is spoken by many black people, particularly disadvantaged black people. Although those who speak nonstandard Negro dialect can communicate effectively and function successfully in a cultural environment where nonstandard Negro dialect is the primary language system, they are handicapped when they come to school where another dialect of English (standard English) is the dialect for communication and learning.

The relationship between achievement—especially achievement in reading—and the inability to speak standard English has been clearly demonstrated many times. That is, children who speak a nonstandard dialect of English usually don't achieve in reading. Since many black children speak a nonstandard dialect of English, these children are disproportionately under-achievers in reading.

Of course, this is not the only reason disadvantaged black children do not achieve in reading . . . there are many other reasons that contribute to the explanation of a lack of achievement in reading by disadvantaged black children. Still, many educators and linguists believe that the lack of standard English speaking skills is the most important reason to explain the lack of achievement in reading by disadvantaged black children. This is particularly the case when the differences between nonstandard Negro dialect and standard English conflict to create difficulties during the conventional methods teachers employ in reading instruction.

One purpose of this paper is to illustrate the nature of the difficulty when disadvantaged black children are taught reading by conventional methods. This will be done by identifying some of the conflict points between nonstandard Negro dialect and standard English, and showing how these differences conflict during the teaching of reading by conventional methods. After these conflict points are pointed out, however, another purpose of this paper is to show that the conflict points—specifically, the phonological conflict points—need not be a problem if they are simply disregarded. Finally, a third purpose of this paper is to argue that disad-

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vantaged black children who speak nonstandard Negro dialect be taught to read their dialect *first* (with only grammatical changes made in reading texts to match their nonstandard grammar), and later—after they have acquired the decoding process and attained some facility in standard English—they should be taught to read standard English.

Conflict points (or, interference points as they are sometimes called) occur between two languages—or dialects—when there is a difference either in sounds or grammatical patterns in particular contrasting linguistic environments. Another way of explaining what conflict points are is that one language system does something different (has another sound or grammatical feature, or has a sound or grammatical feature that does not contrast with a sound or grammatical feature in the other language system) from the other language system at corresponding places. This is the case between nonstandard Negro dialect and standard English: there are points where the two differ in sound or grammar when they are contrasted. These conflict points create difficulty during reading instruction, and when teachers attempt to illustrate the difference they more often confuse disadvantaged black children rather than clarify the difference. The reason for this will be explained.

First, however, it is necessary to illustrate some of the conflict points betweeen nonstandard Negro dialect and standard English. These are not all the conflict points that exist between nonstandard Negro dialect and standard English, but they are outstanding examples, the kinds likely to cause the difficulty in reading instruction. After the conflict points are listed, it will be shown how the conventional approach to teaching reading —specifically, how the conventional way teachers handle the conflict points —confuses rather than helps nonstandard speaking disadvantaged black children (phonological conflict points are listed first, followed by grammatical conflict points).

Standard English has two sounds for the letters *th*—one of the sounds is voiced, the other is voiceless. The voiceless initial sound occurs in words like *thing, thigh* and *thought.* The voiceless final sound occurs in words like *with, both* and *mouth.* In nonstandard Negro dialect, the voiceless initial /th/ is the same as in standard English. The voiceless final /th/ in nonstandard Negro dialect, however, is changed to /f/. Thus, for *with, both* and *mouth,* nonstandard Negro dialect speakers say *wif, bof* and *mouf.* This substitution (or conflict point) operates systematically . . . that is, whenever standard English has a voiceless final /th/, nonstandard Negro dialect has /f/.

In standard English, the voiced initial /th/ occurs in words like *the, this* and *that.* The voiced final /th/ occurs in words like *breathe* and *bathe.* In nonstandard Negro dialect, the voiced initial /th/ is changed to /d/; the words *the, this* and *that* are pronounced *da, dis* and *dat.* The voiced final /th/is changed to /v/ in nonstandard Negro dialect; the words *breathe* and *bathe* are pronounced *breave* and *bave.*

Thus, in nonstandard Negro dialect there are four different sounds for the letters *th,* depending on whether the letters are the voiced or voiceless sound, and whether they occur in the final or initial position, while standard English has only two sounds for the letters *th.*

In nonstandard Negro dialect, certain consonant sounds in the final position tend to be reduced. These consonant sounds are /b/, /d/, /g/. h /p/, /t/ and /k/.

A number of problems are created for the nonstandard speaker learning to read standard English. For example, if certain consonant sounds are reduced in the final position, more homonyms are created in non-

standard Negro dialect. Words like *hard* and *heart, car* and *card, cold* and *coat* become homonyms and this is likely to cause comprehension difficulties in reading (i.e. The boy had a *cold/coat*). The obvious implication for reading instruction is that *more time should be spent on helping non-standard speakers develop the ability to use context clues rather than phonics clues for comprehension* (instead, teachers usually spend a great deal of time trying to get these children to hear the difference between *cold* and *coat*).

Another problem caused by the reduction of consonant sounds at the ends of words occur when certain words are pluralized. For example, the words *test, fist, desk* and *mask* are pronounced in nonstandard Negro dialect as *tes, fis, des* and *mas*. The consonants /t/ and /k/ are two of the consonants reduced in the final position in nonstandard Negro dialect. Reducing the final /t/ and /k/ in the words cited puts /s/ in the final position. In English, words ending in /s/ add another syllable when they are pluralized. For example, the plurals of *kiss, dress, boss* and *pass* are *kisses, dresses, bosses* and *passes*. In other words, the ending to indicate the plural in these words is /iz/. In nonstandard Negro dialect, *tes, fis, des* and *mas* (for *test, fist, desk* and *mask*) end with the consonant /s/, so speakers of nonstandard Negro dialect follow the regular pluralization rule of English for words ending in /s/. Thus, the plurals of *test, fist, desk* and *mask* in nonstandard Negro dialect are: *tessiz, fissiz, dessiz* and *massiz*.

A third problem caused by consonant reduction is the past tense morpheme represented by the letters *ed* (which, in some words, is /t/, one of the consonants reduced in nonstandard Negro dialect). Thus, many nonstandard speakers say, "He talk to him yesterday." If they read this sentence, the letters *ed* signal past tense even if they don't pronounce it.

The sound represented by the letter *r* is reduced in nonstandard Negro dialect creating a phenomenon that William Labov, a linguist at University of Pennsylvania labels "r-lessness." A similar phenomenon that Labov labels "l-lessness" is created by the reduction of the sound represented by the letter *l*. Both r-lessness and l-lessness occur in medial and final positions. Thus, words like *guard, court, help, cold* that contain /r/ or /l/ in the medial position are pronounced as if these sounds aren't there; words like *door, car, school, bowl* that contain /r/ or /l/ in the final position are pronounced without these sounds.

A problem caused by r-lessness in the final position is that more homonyms are produced in nonstandard Negro dialect. For example, *door* and *dough, more* and *mow, store* and *stow*. This may interfere with reading comprehension (in a similar way that consonant reduction at the end of words interferes with comprehension by creating more homonyms as explained, above) and suggests that black children be given extra help on developing skills to determine meaning from context clues.

In nonstandard Negro dialect, there is no distinction between /i/ and /e/ before /n/ and /m/. The sounds /i/ and /e/ are both pronounced /i/ before nasals. Thus, *pin* and *pen, meant* and *mint*, are given the same pronunciation.

It can be seen from these examples of conflict points between nonstandard Negro dialect and standard English that there are many points where difficulties are likely to occur when children who speak this dialect attempt to learn to read. The way teachers handle these difficulties compounds, rather than clarifies, the difficulties. The reason for this situation is the fact that disadvantaged black children have different audio-discrimination skills from those expected by the teachers. In fact, the students fail to hear some of the sounds of standard English; thus, they

fail to pronounce these sounds. Teachers, however, view their pronouncing deviations from standard English as careless, sloppy speech full of errors. Stated another way, disadvantaged black children cannot hear some standard English phonemes and they cannot hear the difference between their nonstandard pronunciation and standard pronunciation. They cannot auditorily discriminate between conflict points. The younger the children, the more this is the case. For example, black children have difficulty distinguishing which pronunciation is given twice in the following series of words: *wif, wif, with; dis, this, dis; share, share, show.* This simple exercise illustrates the difficulty these children have in hearing certain standard English sounds.

The way teachers usually handle this difficulty is to insist that there is a difference—when the children hear no difference. Thus, to tell these children that they are saying *pin* instead of *pen* is to confuse them, since they don't detect the difference!

Or, take the case of consonant reduction at the end of words: black children pronounce *test* and *desk* as *tes* and *des*, and the plurals of these words are *tessiz* and *dessiz.* When a black child says or reads, "The *tessiz* were put on *dessiz*" the usual response of the teacher is to correct the child by pointing out the pronunciation of the words in question is *tests* and *desks.* Now, if the child does not hear the final consonant sounds (/t/ and /k/) in the singular forms of these words, the child also fails to hear /ts/ and /ks/ at the end of the words. Thus, when the teacher says, "Don't say *tessiz* and *dessiz,* say *tests* and *desks*" the child hears, "Don't say *tessiz* and *dessiz* say *tes* and *des*" so the child is left with the impression that the teacher means for him to use the singular form. Yet, in the sample sentence (The tests were put on the desks) the letter *s* signals the plural (assuming that the child reads the sentence) and his pronunciation—*tessiz* and *dessiz*—whether reading or speaking the sentence conveys the correct message. For the teacher to insist that he use the singular form (that is, what he heard as the singular form in her correction) is to confuse the child.

Thus, the different phonological system of nonstandard Negro dialect equips black children with different auditory skills. If teachers do not recognize this, and tend to treat these children as if, through carelessness, they do not hear standard English sounds, they confuse the children.

What should teachers do, how should they handle these conflict points? There are two alternatives. One is to delay reading instruction and work on teaching these children standard English before teaching them to read standard English. The delay in teaching them to read, however, would have to be long because it is unlikely that young disadvantaged black children can learn to speak standard English. What reason can one give them to convince them they need to know it? Where will it be reinforced? Do they need to know it to function in their culture? Also, learning another dialect of a language is, in some ways, more difficult than learning another language. The difficulty, then, is that the delay in teaching these children to read would last until they learn standard English and this is not likely to occur until the children recognize a need to learn standard English—this probably does not occur until adolescence. That is, it would be difficult to convince very young children of the need to learn standard English, particularly if they are attending a school where the majority of children speak nonstandard Negro dialect. If, however, black children are attending a school in which many children speak standard English, they are participating and functioning in an environment where standard English is operable. Under these circumstances, black children may pick up some of the features of standard English. In addition, young children often

learn another language just for the joy of learning a different language. This may also be true of learning another variety—or dialect—of a language. That is, black children may learn some of the features of standard English just because they are new. That is likely to occur only when they have an opportunity to participate in social situations where standard English is the operable linguistic system. It has been pointed out many times that young children easily learn another language, and this phenomenon of language learning has been equated with learning another dialect of a language the learners already speak. The case, however, is not the same: in many ways, learning another dialect of a language is more difficult than learning another language because the differences (conflict points) between two dialects of a language are so subtle as to hide the differences—especially to young children. The important point in young black children learning standard English is that they must be able to use it in meaningful situations. This can only occur when black children have an opportunity to associate with standard English speakers in meaningful situations. If young black children must remain in a social environment where only nonstandard Negro dialect is operable, then it is unlikely that they will learn standard English.

It has been pointed out that if they don't learn standard English, they are likely to have difficulty in learning to read. The problem, then, is how to teach reading to black children who speak nonstandard Negro dialect? There is another alternative, however. This other alternative is *to ignore the phonological conflict points* between nonstandard Negro dialect and standard English, and to teach the children to read in their dialect (reading texts would retain standard spelling, but they would use the grammar of nonstandard Negro dialect). What this means is that black children would be permitted to impose their phonological system onto standard spelling. Thus, the letters *th* occurring at the end of a word would be given the pronunciation of nonstandard Negro dialect: *with* would become *wif; breathe* would become *breave.* Or, in some cases letters would be silent (consonants at the end of words, the letters *r* and *l* in some cases). In other words, standard spelling would receive nonstandard pronunciation.

Actually, this is not as radical a proposal as it seems. Standard pronunciation does not match standard spelling. There are countless examples of words not being spelled the way it could logically be expected on the basis of pronunciation and the English graphemic system (*phone, enough, ration,* etc.) and English spelling is full of silent letters (*receive, caught, meant,* etc.). Thus, black children are being asked to do no more than what all children who learn to read English are doing, anyway.

The grammar of reading texts for disadvantaged black children should be the grammar of nonstandard Negro dialect, because it is grammar, not pronunciation, which carries meaning. A black child who says, "mouf" means "mouth" but a black child who says, "My mouf hurtin'" means something that can't be expressed grammatically in standard English, or a black child who says, "She been talk to him" again means something that can't be grammatically expressed in standard English.

Nonstandard Negro dialect differs from—or conflicts with—standard English at specific points, and these points interfere with reading comprehension. In addition, black children, when they read standard English, are encountering a strange grammar system and this causes them to read haltingly and with difficulty. To illustrate how the grammar of nonstandard Negro dialect differs from the grammar of standard English, a few conflict points between the two varieties of English will be pointed out.

In nonstandard Negro dialect, it is unnecessary to put the plural morpheme onto a word if another word in the sentence indicates that the

word is plural. For example, in the sentence, "The three boys are running down the street" the word *three* marks the plural; thus, in nonstandard Negro dialect the sentence is, "the three boy running down the street" (the copula verb *are* is also omitted in present progressive tense of the verb *to be* in nonstandard Negro dialect). Now, in reading the sentence, black children may not pronounce the plural ending of *boys*. In other words, their dialect pattern interferes. A teacher, hearing a black child read the sentence without pronouncing the plural ending, will usually correct the child for a *reading* error when what is really going on is interference, and it should be pointed out to the child the difference between nonstandard and standard English when marking plurals. This observation helps the child contrast his language system with standard English, and he is more likely to learn the standard pattern, "three boys" if he is aware of the conflict, rather than treating his pattern as a reading error.

In nonstandard Negro dialect, the possessive morpheme is not necessary. Thus, the sentence, "That man's hat is too big" would be, "That man hat too big." Again, when black children fail to pronounce the possessive morpheme teachers usually treat this as a reading error, rather than an interference point between the two language systems.

The most important problem of grammatical interference is not the failure of black children to pronounce certain inflectional endings of standard English (the past tense *ed;* the third person singular, present tense morpheme; the possessive morpheme; the plural morpheme), but the difference in *meaning* that the conflicting grammatical features of their dialect carry. Because nonstandard Negro grammar differs in both structure and meanings, it is recommended here that texts be written in their dialect.

Some examples of grammatical features in nonstandard Negro dialect which mean something different from standard English, and which teachers generally don't understand are: forming the past tense of regular verbs; conjugating irregular verbs; conjugating the verb *to be.*

The past tense of regular verbs in standard English is formed by adding the inflectional ending, or past tense morpheme, to the verb: *play, played; talk, talked.* Because black children reduce the consonant sounds /d/ and /t/ at the end of words, they often say or read *play* for *played,* and *talk* for *talked.* In their dialect, this means the same as the standard English inflected verb—that is, action was completed in the past. Often, when a black child fails to pronounce the inflectional ending during reading, teachers correct the child by pointing out to him that the word means action happened in the past. Now, the child knows this, because he sees the letters, *ed* and this signals past tense to him. By telling the child in a correcting manner something he already knows is likely to cause some confusion. Usually, the teacher demands that the child pronounce the "ed" which results in the overcorrection of pronouncing *talked* as *talk-ted.* The teacher usually forgets to let the child in on the secret that the "ed" is really a "t" at the end of *talked.* It was pointed out that when black children say *play* for *played* and *talk* for *talked,* it means the same as it does in standard English. But nonstandard Negro dialect can indicate grammatically that the action not only happened in the past, but that it happened in the *distant* past. This is done by adding the auxiliary verb *been.* For example, "I talk to the man" means that the speaker talked to the man sometime in the past; but, "I been talked to the man" means that the speaker talked to the man in the distant past. Further, nonstandard Negro dialect can grammatically indicate that the action happened so long ago that it is ridiculous even to mention or question the action. This is achieved by adding *done:* "I been done talked to the man." Standard English cannot

make these distinctions grammatically, and here is one point where nonstandard Negro dialect is more complicated (often, nonstandard Negro dialect is erroneously thought to be a "simplified" version of English). If reading texts were written in nonstandard Negro dialect, the reading comprehension of black children could be increased.

Another grammatical feature which differs from standard English is the irregular verb pattern in nonstandard Negro dialect. In standard English, the pattern for irregular verbs is: *do, did, have done; take, took, have taken.* In nonstandard Negro dialect, the pattern for irregular verbs is: *do, done, have did; take, taken, have took.* The past tense form and the past participle form are reversed from standard English. When a black child says, "The boys taken the ball" he is using the past tense of the verb *take.* The teacher, however, hearing *taken* without *have* assumes that the child is just being sloppy or careless in omitting *have;* thus, the teacher "corrects" the child by telling him the sentence should be, "The boys *have taken* the ball." Notice that the teacher has switched tense on the child—he used his past tense, but the teacher "corrects" him into the standard present perfect tense. What this means to the child is that the standard past tense of the verb *take* is formed by saying *have taken!* Now, if the teacher knows the grammatical system of nonstandard Negro dialect, the standard equivalent of "The boys taken the ball" can be given to the child: "The boys took the ball." To "correct" the child into a different tense is to create confusion, and it prevents the black child from learning the appropriate translation.

The verb *to be* in nonstandard Negro dialect is different from standard English, and includes forms which have special meanings that aren't duplicated in standard English. For example, the present progressive tense sentence, "The teacher is talking" in nonstandard Negro dialect is, "The teacher talking." The copula is omitted if the action—the talking—is currently happening. That is, the "talking" is going on now. But nonstandard Negro dialect can indicate that the action is a regular or habitual action by adding the verb *be:* "The teacher be talking." Standard English can't make this grammatical distinction. Again, "correction" can create confusion rather than clarification. If a teacher tells a black child to say: "The teacher is talking" for his "The teacher be talking" the child is not being taught the appropriate translation.

These examples of the difference between the grammars of nonstandard Negro dialect and standard English were given to illustrate how a difference in meaning exists because of the grammatical differences. There are many such examples when contrasting nonstandard Negro dialect and standard English.

Because of these differences, it is recommended that beginning texts for black children who speak nonstandard Negro dialect be written in their dialect. Again, it is unnecessary to alter spelling for reasons pointed out, above. Dialect texts would undoubtedly be more meaningful to black children. After all, these children would be *reading* the variety of English they are *speaking*. Not only should this increase comprehension, but black children would be able to read a lot more smoothly instead of the halting way many of them now read because they are mentally juggling two linguistic systems when they read. It seems as if educators could not argue against the logic of this . . . but they do. The arguments, however, are not logical but emotional. The arguments usually point out that to teach black children to read their dialect is to deprive them of the equal quality education white children receive. Some educators base their argument on the erroneous view that nonstandard Negro dialect is really not a language at all, or that it is an incomplete language (something that is linguistically impossible). Others point out that these children would be handicapped

because they would only know how to read their dialect. What is being suggested here, however, is that black children begin to read in their dialect, and after they have learned to read—that is when they know the decoding process—they can then make a transition to reading standard English texts.

Actually, the proposal to teach black children to read in their dialect is not so radical. In other parts of the world (Sweden and Haiti are two examples) children are taught to read in their local dialects before they read the national dialect. The opposition in this country to such a proposal (and the opposition is fierce) is really based on a kind of ethnocentrism, and a disregard—even a rejection—of black culture. That is, many feel that standard English is the only variety of English, that should appear in print since it is the "best." The corollary of this is that nonstandard Negro dialect is inferior, sloppy speech that does not deserve the dignity and legitimacy of appearing in print. In case one doubts that this is the case, attend a conference of educators where the question of teaching black children to read in their dialect is discussed.

Ironically, black teachers are the greatest objectors to teaching black children to read in their dialect. These black teachers reject their own cultural identity more strenuously than many whites reject "blackness." One can understand black teachers' objections if one understands the way our society has taught black people to hate themselves, and how black people infer self-hate from the way a racist society has treated them.

A few attempts are being made to try this approach in teaching black children to read. The most notable attempt is being conducted at the Education Study Center in Washington, D. C. William A. Stewart and Joan C. Baratz have produced a series of dialect readers and the initial results after using these readers are dramatically promising (not only are these readers written in nonstandard Negro dialect, but they are also culturally accurate, that is, the stories are about real black folks, not black white folks).

Unfortunately, no one can deny that black children are not learning to read. There is no need for documentation, since it is well known that this is one of the monumental problems of American education. All other methods and materials have been tried without massive success (there has been limited success with small populations using a variety of approaches and materials). Yet, when the method proposed here is asking for a chance to prove its effectiveness, educators start screaming about the ineffectiveness of the approach to teach black children to read in their dialect *before the approach has even been tested.* Such prejudice does not belong in American education.

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